

**SHE WHO WALKS
WITH FEET FACING
BACKWARDS AND
LAUGHS IN THE
WILDERNESS: AO
NAGA NARRATIVES OF
AONGLEMLA**

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WHO IS AONGLEMLA?

With a gargantuan reputation that belies her tiny stature, Aonglemla has been part of the folk beliefs of the Ao Naga community in North-East India. Encounters with Aonglemla and the events that follow such encounters are usually part of the narrative traditions of hunters and explorers. Embedded in the accounts of their valour and mis/adventures in the jungle and passed on from one hunter to another and from one hearth to another, these narratives are often crafted to evoke awe and admiration among the listeners. Over time, multiple variations of encounters/sightings of Aonglemla have been verbally expressed and circulated within and outside the community which have amplified the authority and ambiguity surrounding this particular entity. Oral narratives usually describe Aonglemla as a supernatural entity, tiny in stature, with long hair or with a hairy body and feet

that face backwards. Considered to be female because an Aonglemla possesses certain attributes that are feminine in terms of physical appearance, she is also known for her high-pitched laughter that reverberates throughout the forest. She inhabits parts of the forest where there are swamps/water bodies and thick bamboo groves and eats worms, insects, leaves and crab. Most villages in areas inhabited by the Ao Nagas have identified locations on their terrain which are supposed to be dwelling places of Aonglemla. Footprints resembling that of a tiny human being found in such places are seen as evidence of her presence. Seasoned hunters and explorers are known to give cautionary advice while passing specific locations in the villages so that travellers can avoid crossing her path. Encounters with Aonglemla are believed to lead to misfortune or bad luck for the individual or someone connected to him/her. A number of stories in circulation describe hunters or their families/relatives/acquaintances who either died or had some fatal illness/accident as a consequence of crossing paths with Aonglemla.

Written scholarship on Aonglemla is scant and limited; it is confined to brief paragraphs by colonial anthropologists and researchers from the community, and their descriptions pretty much corroborate each other's descriptions:

There is also a jungle ghost called aonglemla (C and M), a dwarf creature with long hair reaching to the ground, which goes about chuckling. Happily, it is very rare, for to see one is fatal. One Puroshushang of Waromong saw one near the Tzüram stream about eight years ago. He told my informant when he got home, and died five days later. His widow and children have been poor ever since (Mills, 1926, p. 223).

In *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition*, Temsula Ao writes about a dwarf like female creature called *Alonglemla* whose hair reaches the ground, has feet pointing backwards and who eats fruits, vegetables and small animals like crabs, prawns and fish. Ao writes:

many hunters and people who have gone deep into the jungles have claimed to have seen such creatures. At other times, it is claimed that its laughter is heard; sometimes giggling like a young girl and sometimes ferociously, shaking the trees and mountains around it. Any meetings with such creatures is considered a bad omen. At times one comes across foam like substances clinging to shrubs and bushes, which the Ao say is the sputum of Aonglemla. Incidentally, as the name implies, this creature is female! (Ao, 1999, p. 52).

In Mills' monograph *The Ao Nagas*, Aonglemla is also a fiend who presents an obstacle that human souls within the Ao Naga context have to overcome to complete their transition from the mortal to the spiritual realm:

At a certain point on the road she meets a fiend with long hair called Aonglamlam (sic). The fiend will chase her and demand a present. Now a sword-bean seed was carefully placed with the other things in the carrying-basket hung up on her corpse-platform. This is where it comes in useful. She takes it out of the load and rolls it along the ground. The fiend scampers after it, thinking it is something valuable, and the woman slips by (Mills, 1926, p. 230).

A malevolent spirit, demon/devil, jungle ghost, water spirit, strange creature, primate, shape-shifter, trickster or urban legend? Perhaps malevolent or defensive depending on how you look at it. Certainly someone who is inherently connected with the forest. However, it would be prejudicial to label Aonglemla as a spirit that is inherently evil, or a jungle ghost that just wants to anger human beings on a whim.

In the second-person, does one refer to Aonglemla as *pa* (he), *la* (she) or *iba* (it)? What gender is Aonglemla? Is it male or female? Is it both or neither? Historically, Aonglemla has been referred to as female because she possesses certain feminine attributes, but within current contexts and the new narratives that have emerged, her femininity is sometimes contested. During fieldwork, some of the resource persons

that I engaged with found it difficult to articulate Aonglemla's gender. In their narratives, Aonglemla oscillated between *pa* (he),¹ *la* (she) or *iba* (it). There exists some confusion regarding Aonglemla's gender and her status as a supernatural entity. Hypothetical assumptions, narrative embellishments and personal beliefs play a huge role in how these encounters are perceived, remembered and expressed. These factors have in turn created more speculation and ambiguity about Aonglemla.

Colonial anthropologists in the 19th century as well as Christianity and popular contemporary culture helped propel the idea of Aonglemla as a malicious spirit and a demonic figure. While Aonglemla may exhibit certain characteristics that are spirit-like in the western sense, it is problematic to use these terms egregiously as they do not accurately represent Aonglemla or the indigenous belief system of the Ao tribe. The word 'entity' seems more appropriate for an ambiguous being that straddles the liminal spaces between human and non-human, physical and spiritual, myth and factuality.

This article documents oral narratives of Aonglemla that are in circulation within the Ao Naga community and explores the ways in which contextual shifts like Christianity and digital media have contributed to creating discursive frames of representation and amplified the aura and ambiguity surrounding Aonglemla.

I first heard about Aonglemla during the 1990s when my uncles and cousins visiting our home in Tuensang narrated tales of encounters with a dwarfish female entity while hunting/ foraging in the forests. Barely three or four feet in height, she was described as having a human-like body with long hair that trailed the length of her body and feet that were turned backwards. Considered a bad omen, encountering Aonglemla plays out in a few scenarios: fatal illness or accidents, bad luck in hunting, death and in some cases abduction. She is also blamed for making hunters lose their way in the forest and for inducing hallucinations. The misfortunes/symptoms fall either on the individual or someone connected to him/her.

One of the stories narrated by my uncle during my childhood had to do with an abduction by Aonglemla. During a hunting expedition, Aonglemla abducted a young man from a neighbouring village. She hauled him up a large tree where he was fed frogs and worms for the duration of his captivity. According to the narrative, Aonglemla had licked his entire body with her sputum, making him so slimy that he was unable to climb down the tree and escape. The villagers mobilized a search party, and they finally located him in the forest sitting on the top of a tree. After he was rescued, the young boy was delirious for weeks and could not speak coherently or eat properly. It was only with the help of an indigenous ritual practitioner who performed exorcism rituals that he regained his mental and physical equilibrium. The finer details surrounding his abduction and the aftermath are sketchy but these kinds of narratives are standard within the community cementing Aonglemla's status as an entity that is not very friendly towards human beings.

ORIGINS/ETYMOLOGIES

While generally referred to as Aonglemla, we find slight variations of the name in different villages even within the Ao community.² Writer Temsula Ao is from Changki village and she refers to her as *Alonglemla* in *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (1999). My resource persons in Longsa village referred to her as *Aonglalem*, those from Molungkimong called her Aonglemla³ or *Aongmetanglatsü* while another person from Khensa called her Aonglemlatsü. However, the meaning of her name is more or less the same. The name itself underscores her connection to the natural world.

The Ao language has two main dialectics – *Mongsen* and *Chungli* – and her name seems to originate in the *Mongsen* branch of Ao language. *Aong* means forest while *lemla* can be loosely translated either as someone whose presence fills the forest with warmth, or simply

someone who inhabits the forest. The suffix *la* denotes the feminine gender in Ao so this implies that Aonglemla is female. Her distinctive voice that is claimed to echo piercingly in the forest is also why she is known as *Aongmetanglatsü* or *Aongmetangla* where *metanglatsü* or *metangla* means someone whose voice echoes or reverberates, a definite nod to her vocal skills.

Aonglemla's intrinsic link with nature is evident especially when one looks at the etymology of her name. In Ao folklore, there is an origin tale⁴ which explains how Aonglemla came into existence. This was narrated by different resource persons during the course of my fieldwork and a written version can be found in *Tar Nunger Otsü: Myths of the Hills in Ao Dialect* by Talitemjen Imchen (1993: 33–42). This tale provides the back story on Aonglemla through a seemingly straightforward narrative that unpacks a lot on a closer examination.

As the tale⁵ goes, once upon a time a man and his wife lived in an Ao village. The wife died early leaving her husband with a son and a daughter. Shortly after his wife's death, the man remarried and his new wife came to live with him and his children. The new wife became pregnant and she gave birth to a baby boy, the newest member of the family.

As time passed, the village where they had settled down decided to abandon its present site and move to a new location. The entire village became busy with this endeavour, and there were many meetings and activities for this huge transition. As a senior member of the village, the husband was occupied with the activities of the village council leaving his wife in charge of the children as well as preparing for the relocation. She had to make an inventory of all the household items and sort out and pack everything in the house.

On the fateful day selected by the village council for the entire village's moving, the wife sent the siblings to fetch water from the watering well. As it was going to be a busy day, she sternly instructed them not to wait for one another. The sister quickly filled her bamboo cylinders with water and returned home as instructed, but the boy could not complete his task as quickly. Unbeknownst to him, his step

mother had pierced the base of his bamboo cylinders. His cylinders kept leaking water from the base and they never filled. But the poor boy could not figure this out. He was so terrified of his step mother's wrath that he chose not to return home.

Meanwhile as planned, the entire village commenced the journey to the new village site. There was excitement and anticipation as everyone carried their belongings and travelled to their new homes. The villagers sang and shared jokes on the way. All the villagers were present except for the young boy. On being questioned about his absence, the mother nonchalantly replied that he was a defiant boy who was probably wandering somewhere in the crowd with his friends. The father located his friends but even they were clueless about his whereabouts. He was nowhere in the crowd and when they finally arrived at the new site, he was still missing.

As it was already dark, the father returned to the old village the next morning at daybreak to find his son. Worried that he might have lost his way, he went looking for him in the forest and reached the watering well. From a distance, he noticed a boy sitting on a rock. Although the boy's back was turned to him, he recognized him as his son and was overcome with joy and relief. But as the father drew closer to give his son the bundle of food that he had wrapped for him in plantain leaves, the boy suddenly disappeared and reappeared on another rock. Perplexed by this and assuming that his son was angry with him for neglecting him, he pleaded with his son to come with him but he vanished again. Despite pleading continually, the son did not turn around. Extremely dejected, the father returned home with a broken heart. The next day and in the days to come, he returned to the spot to beg his son to return but his son refused to talk to him, vanishing every time he tried to come closer to him.

One night, the son appeared to him in a dream. Overjoyed to see him, the father pledged that from now on he would not let the step mother mistreat them ever again. He also promised that he would be a better father and they will have the final say in matters of the household. The son replied that he did not doubt his love for him, but

he was unfortunately not human any more, and was now in a different space. He told his father that he had transformed, and although he did love his father, they could not live under one roof any more. With these words, he walked out from the house, and the dream ended before the father could succeed in stopping his son.

Before the break of dawn, the father rushed back to the forest to see his son and he found him at the same spot, sitting alone on a rock near the water. He told his son that he was aware that they now inhabited different worlds, so he would not request him to return to the human world again. He told him that he understood the message in the dream. The father promised that he won't disturb his son's territory and would leave him alone as he wished. The son nodded in agreement and vanished. After bidding farewell to his son, the father returned home with a heavy heart. As he had vowed, he never returned to that spot but in the years to come, villagers passing by that spot in the forest would often see a lonely figure sitting on the rock. They somehow felt comforted seeing a human-like figure in the forest and thus they started calling this figure Aonglemla.

The phenomenon of human-animal transformation can be found in most oral cultures and Ao folklore, and its belief system encompasses plenty of material that deals with anthropomorphism and therianthropy like *ki-nela* (tiger souls) – humans whose souls reside in tigers; trees that can transform into human form; or a bird's feather impregnating a woman.⁶ Such narratives illustrate that the dichotomy between human beings and the natural world is not as clear and distinct as we imagine it to be. The tale of Aonglemla's origin speaks to us about betrayal and injustice, and the tensions that arise from the web of inter-personal relationships. We have a girl or a boy, or both (which ever version you choose; I imagine Aonglemla to be a female) rejecting human ties out of sheer heartbreak and grief which gives them the agency and power to shed their humanity in form and essence, eventually transforming into non-human being/beings. The tale of Aonglemla's origin also speaks about complicated relationships,

stereotypical portrayals of wicked step mothers and spineless men and the age-old conflict between humans and nature. It is a tragic tale that can be interpreted in many different ways, but I don't think I have heard any version of this tale which implies that Aonglemla is malevolent or has evil intentions towards human beings. In fact, there is a certain melancholy to Aonglemla in the way she avoids human interaction because she has been hurt by humans before.

Aonglemla's shift from a therianthrope being to a malicious spirit is possibly one of the manifestation/s that occurred with Christianity in the 20th century. Proselytization produced many ruptures within the indigenous worldview creating stark binaries between Christian and indigenous beliefs. The pantheon of deities and entities within the Ao cosmology is predominantly male. *Lijaba* is the main deity, the creator of the earth, *Longitsungba* or *Aningsungba* is the deity of the sky or heaven while the deity of the dead is *Meyutsungba*. The main deities worshipped and supplicated in Ao belief are all male.

Aonglemla is perhaps the only known female entity that has a proper noun in Ao cosmology and folklore. Female spirits and entities are usually clubbed under generic categories of *moching* (devil), *temenen tanela* (evil spirit), *kimong tsungrem* (house spirit) or *temok temnu* (troublesome being). With the advent of Christianity, the legion of indigenous deities and entities was automatically clubbed with Lucifer and his cohorts and categorized as demons/malevolent beings, completely overlooking the dual nature that these deities and entities exhibited. While not as powerful or revered as the male deities like *Lijaba* and *Meyutsungba*, no other spiritual entity has inspired a multitude of legends and fuelled the imagination within folk discourses as Aonglemla has in contemporary contexts. Coupled with this, embellishments by story tellers and the capricious nature of oral traditions have enhanced Aonglemla's wizardry and diabolic nature. These emergent narratives of encounters and sightings have added to the existing body of folklore on Aonglemla, giving it validation and a transformative agency.

ENCOUNTERS WITH AONGLEMLA: NARRATIVES OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

It is unlikely that you will encounter Aonglemla in the middle of the street in broad daylight. People who venture deep into the forest to explore, forage or hunt are the ones who encounter Aonglemla and these people usually happen to be men. This is why the voices behind the narratives are predominantly male. During the course of this research, I was unable to locate any women who had had first-hand encounters with Aonglemla. It certainly would have been interesting to find out if/how different or similar their experiences, responses and narratives were from the menfolk.

Most of the first-hand encounters that I documented for this research occurred around the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s with the exception of one person who encountered Aonglemla in 2017. Interestingly, in this particular encounter the resource person said that he saw Aonglemla wearing something that resembled a green skirt on the lower half of her body. Clearly, current clothing styles and fashion trends have impacted the perceptions and narrations of such encounters.

Shifting contexts of Ao Naga society's belief systems are largely responsible for transforming Aonglemla into a malevolent spirit. Christianity is the dominant religion in Nagaland since American missionaries first converted Ao Nagas to Christianity in 1872. Christianity dismantled the cultural ethos of the Aos by its imposition of prohibitions on all aspects of the indigenous way of life. It started with headhunting and the rituals of traditional religion, but slowly the prohibitions became all pervasive taking on an autocratic tone. Drinking rice wine, tattooing (which was an important rite of passage for girls), feasts of merit, singing folk songs and wearing traditional clothes came under the radar of prohibition. Dr Piketo Sema notes, 'the missionaries saw conversion as a total about turn by the converts from their old ways of life. Conversion was thus not enough. The new converts had to sever all connections with the rites and customs

relating to the so-called pagan worship' (1992, pp. 86-87). Within Christianized contexts, indigenous spirits and deities were completely demonized, joining the ranks of Biblical demons and fallen angels. What was *tsungrem* (god/deity) in the past was now considered *moching* (demon) or *temenen tanela* (evil spirit). Aonglemla's transformation into a *moching* or a *temenen tanela* demonic being is a reflection of the changing belief systems, and their projection within the community. By projecting negative and demonic qualities on to Aonglemla and other indigenous entities, a belief in the supremacy of a Christian god and his authority over indigenous entities is reiterated. These established beliefs about Aonglemla as a demonic figure and a harbinger of misfortunes became embedded in the emerging narratives of encounters with Aonglemla. They were very pronounced in the narratives of the resource persons, who were all first and second-generation Christians.

Six narratives of personal experiences during the fieldwork were transcribed and translated for this article. Since my fieldwork was more in the form of informal conversations rather than in an interview/questionnaire mode, the translations were also in the same free-flowing spirit of how these exchanges took place.

THE WATER SPIRIT WITH LUMINOUS HAIR

Tongpang Aier lived the early part of his life in Mokokchung before relocating to Dimapur and settling there. It was during the 1970s that he encountered Aonglemla while going to collect water from the community pond in Mokokchung:

That pond is just near the warong.⁷ I saw her while going to collect water at around 2 or 3 in the morning. She had really long hair and a tiny face. I had gone with my cousin brother. He had seen her clearly many times before and he was the one who told me her feet were turned backwards. It was early morning and foggy

so I did not see her very clearly, around November-December in 1978 or 1979. She had really long hair; I told my wife about this sighting as well, that I had seen what we call Aonglemla. She is supposed to be a water spirit. We got goose bumps all over at that moment, my cousin brother even threw a stone at her. I was about 8-years-old at that time. There was a half-complete water tank near the pond, she was sitting on the top and suddenly she vanished. Her hair was really long, neither black or white, a little brownish or reddish but it was silky and luminous. My cousin pointed out to me that it was Aonglemla. He threw a stone at her and she suddenly vanished. That forest is near Artang, below Yashitsungba's house. My neighbour Jongshilemba had also seen her very clearly but he died a long time back. She is human-like, just shorter in stature.

DERAILED AT FROG-HUNTING

In 2015, Bendangmoa and his neighbour Imtiwati went frog hunting in the marshy woods of Mokokchung. Home to a variety of wildlife and amphibians, the forest was just a few kilometres from their homes in Sungkomen ward. Guided by their flashlights, they made their way into the dark woods when Bendangmoa noticed a figure. At first, he assumed it was a tree trunk but it moved and scurried past him. The figure was short and human-like with hair trailing at the back, and as he directed his flashlight on the moving figure, it moved with superhuman speed and disappeared up the hill. This fleeting encounter left Bendangmoa shaken and that night; he was not his normal nimble self. While Imtiwati caught plenty of frogs, he was clumsy in the water managing to catch only toads, and he found himself wading into deeper waters repeatedly. Suspecting that something was wrong, Imtiwati put a halt to their frog hunting and called it a night.

On their way home, they crossed paths with a group of people who took offence at Bendangmoa blinding them with his flashlight for a

tad too long. It escalated into a heated argument and it was only when Imtiwati explained that Bendangmoa had encountered Aonglemla that they backed off. Back home as Bendangmoa continued to remain in a dazed state his brother burnt a bunch of dry red chili peppers to ward off Aonglemla's influence from the house. As the smoke released the capsaicin, everyone except Bendangmoa broke into uncontrollable coughs as their eyes burned. It was only later when the effect of the pepper penetrated through his haze that he started coughing much to the relief of his family. The coughing signified Bendangmoa's release from Aonglemla's spell. His grandmother later said that he was very lucky to have survived an encounter with Aonglemla without any fatality, and this was because his bad luck had passed on to the belligerent gang he had met while coming back home.

ENCOUNTER AT *MEZDE AIT*

Likoktemjen Pongen, a 90-year-old man from Longsa village encountered Aonglemla during the late 1960s in a forest that the villagers call *Mezde Ait*, a popular hunting spot at that time. When I met him, he was taking a break from logging activities in a spot which was quite near the forest where he had encountered Aonglemla:

Around 4 in the evening, I went hunting. It was the year ..., what year was that? When that person got shot? 1950s, 1960s or 1970s. (His wife replied that it was around the time when they were in the old house, while our interlocutor Aochuba chimed in and said that it happened either in 1966 or 1967). Oh, it was around 1967 or so. So, around noon, I slung my rifle and went to this marshy spot in the forest. I waited there hoping to shoot some animals. While I was waiting, I heard this deep grunting sound – ‘Oh hei! oh hei! oh hei!’ It was a sound that I had never heard in my life. It did not sound like a human or an animal. I wondered what it was. It was getting dark and this strange sound made me uneasy. I immediately loaded my rifle with two rounds and as quietly as

possible, sprinted to the nearest tree to take shelter. I heard the sound of footsteps coming closer like 'krak, krak'.

I glanced and about 50 feet away I saw someone barely two and a half feet tall, the hair was really black and messy in texture. It was not exactly long like a woman's hair. Instead of coming towards me, it went the other way, trudging slowly uphill carrying a stick for support. It seemed like the climb was a bit of a struggle as its pace was very slow and it kept grunting 'Oh hei, Oh hei, Oh hei!' like someone who was very tired. At one point, it slipped and fell down the slope.

Deciding to take advantage of that moment, I aimed my rifle to shoot it but I realized something. I was all alone in the forest which was getting dark and this creature was probably a powerful demon. If I missed my shot, I had no backup. So, I lowered my gun and at that exact moment, this creature saw me. She started laughing- 'Oooooooooohaoooooooooo!' It was a piercing laugh that reverberated all over the forest. All the birds flew out from the trees in one big swooshing movement. I was distracted by the laughter and everything that was happening; it disappeared from view but the laughter continued to echo throughout the forest. As I looked around, an orok⁸ came flying and perched on the tree above me. I shot the bird and the laughter immediately stopped. I got really scared, so with the bird in hand, I ran back home feeling weird and very uneasy. I was sure I had met the devil and something was not right.

Two months later, a group of people from the Sangtem area took me for another hunting trip. Unfortunately, this time someone from our hunting party shot my friend by accident. The bullet went straight through his forehead and he died immediately. I had to carry his body all the way back to the village. I think it is not a good omen to meet Aonglemla. I did not encounter it the second time but it is not a good sign at all. My friend died the next time I went hunting and I remember carrying his body all the way to the village. It was such a struggle.

Her laughter is quite something, really- 'Ooooooooohaaaaaaa!' When it laughed I was puzzled and all the creatures and birds ran away. It disappeared after that. Exactly like a human being,



Figure 1. Likoktemjen Pongen in Longsa village
Image: Talilula (2019).

tiny and short, less than three feet. The hair on its body was very shiny and black. It looked like it was plaited and messy. Its face was exactly like a female's, she was very beautiful with a very well-defined nose. She was grunting like someone carrying a heavy load. It was getting dark so I did not see her legs that clearly but I saw her face and arms very clearly. She walked like a human being. So funny, she really struggled while trekking up the hill. One time, she even slipped and fell. Not fast at all! Her grunting sounded like an animal but she looked like a human being. I am not sure she had backward feet as claimed; I did not see that clearly as it was dark in the forest. But she walked very slowly and hobbled like she was injured. She slipped once on a slope. They say that she walks very slowly because of her backward feet but I could not see her feet clearly. I cannot confirm about the feet but her gait was very slow and unsteady. You know, Mezde Ait, the forest where I saw Aonglemla is just near the trail you took to get here.

AONGLEMLA WORE A GREEN SKIRT

Zulutemjen Jamir's encounter with Aonglemla in 2017 is the most recent sighting that I could document during my fieldwork. At 85, Zulutemjen is now a retired school teacher who is also well-known as an *araseniür*⁹ in Longsa village:

One evening, I came back rather late from the field, everyone else had left earlier. I spotted her from the back. So, what I saw from the back was, she was very short and her feet... our feet are pointed this way right? But hers were turned in the opposite direction. The toe fingers were on the opposite side while the heel was where our toe fingers are. Quite short in height with deep reddish hair. I stood transfixed as I watched the figure move, and I think it sensed that someone was staring because suddenly it turned its head and looked at me. This strange figure kept looking at me as it trekked up the hill. I also did not look away and continued watching. I noticed that it did not have feet like ours, it had backward feet. The face was not huge; it was a very tiny face. Very human-like, with eyes and nose, the nose was not pointed but a bit broad, like that of apes. The hair was reddish and very frizzy and curly, in the back it fell below the shoulders and in the front it covered a bit of the face as well. After climbing up a bit, it paused and laughed loudly- 'Waaaaaaaaahaaaaahaaaaaa'. When I heard that laugh, I was extremely shocked and I returned home quickly. I thought to myself, so this is what Aonglemla looks like. Shortly after I returned, a neighbour passed away. So, you meet Aonglemla when someone is going to die. That was the only time I met her, which was in 2017.

I don't know what exactly it was, but it looked like she was wearing a dark greenish *süpeti*¹⁰ or a skirt, which was knee-length. Her legs were human-like but hairy, her feet were definitely strange, turned backwards. She walked exactly like us. She was very short and old, her skin was mature and wrinkled. She had small sleepy eyes. We stared at each other for a while and then she laughed with that piercing sound. Her laughter sounded like a human being laughing and it echoed throughout the forest.

I stopped at a nearby granary in the field to pray for protection from this demon. I thought, why should I be scared when my god is stronger than any of these demons?

But when I reached home, unfortunately I heard that my neighbour had just taken his last breath. You know, the first thing I checked was her feet, because I had heard about Aonglemla's feet and it was just as I had heard. Her feet were turned backwards and her toe nails were long, gnarly and dirty. She had hairy feet as well. You know, I tried not to be scared but when she laughed, I got goose bumps all over my body. That was the only time I really saw her, although I did hear her laughter in the forest many times after that. Her laughter was so powerful it felt like the whole forest was rumbling.

LAUGHTER THAT SHOOK THE HILLS OF *MENDEBAASÜ LEMANG*

In Longsa village where I went for fieldwork, Bendangtemsü Jamir took me to the spot where he encountered Aonglemla during the 1980s. We hiked to *Mendebaasü Lemang*, a place named after an ancestor who was killed by head hunters from another village. Logging activities and jhum cultivation have impacted the density of the forest cover in this area considerably. A seasoned hunter, Bendangtemsü told me that the forest was denser and more formidable in the past. As we trekked down an incline, he pointed out a gigantic tree that had been felled. It was a *sungsa*¹¹ tree, favoured by lumbers and loggers because it makes good timber.

One Sunday in February, an ideal month for hunting, Bendangtemsü came to *Mendebaasü* hoping to shoot some game. Around afternoon, he decided to catch a break and put his rifle down and leaned against this same *sungsa* tree to take some rest. While he was resting, he heard a rustling noise and when he looked, he saw



Figure 2. Bendangtemsü Jamir at Mendebaasü Lemang in Longsa village
Image: Talilula (2019).



Figure 3. Bendangtemsü Jamir describing the encounter
Image: Talilula (2019).

someone leap from the tree above him to the ground. The figure was short, no more than two and a half feet and had black shiny hair all over its body. For a quick second, this being turned and stared at him before scurrying down the hill. As the figure disappeared from view, the sound of footsteps and laughter reverberated throughout the forest. The sound of the footsteps felt like a giant stomping the ground, and the laughter shook the entire forest. It felt like the entire forest was quaking from the impact of the tiny being's laughter and footsteps. Bendangtemsu was stunned to say the least, and it took him some time to recover from that encounter. Fearing that something might happen, he decided to return immediately. Despite a common belief that encountering Aonglemla is a bad omen, Bendangtemsu says that nothing bad happened to him. He does not remember any suspicious illness or accidents happening to him. He recalls that before she scurried into the woods, when their eyes met for a quick moment, Aonglemla's eyes were as startled as his.

HYMN SINGER AND TRICKSTER

According to Bendangyanger Jamir, Aonglemla is not as malevolent or powerful as other evil spirits, but she is capable of creating illusions and confusing humans who encounter her. Currently settled with his family in Dimapur, Bendangyanger crossed paths with Aonglemla multiple times in Aliba village during the 1970s. He says that in Aliba village, there is a particular location which villagers believe to be Aonglemla's home. Accordingly, the villagers have christened the place Aonglemlatsü *Lushi*:

I had gone hunting with my friend Temjenwapang; he is now a doctor in Guwahati. We had gone to harvest raw bamboo shoot from the forest. While having lunch by the river, we heard the bamboo grove nearby rustle and shake with intensity. It sounded like a group of people were scratching the surface of the bamboo.

We got our daos¹² ready and that is when we saw this tiny figure slip out from the grove. Really short, barely three or four feet tall with silky hair. Black in colour and so lustrous, it looked like shampooed hair. It had tiny legs and the feet were inverted, turned backwards. We tried to chase it but it was too fast and vanished into the woods. We knew our day was spoiled so we returned home after that encounter.

Even after that, I encountered her many times but all these sightings were fleeting. I never saw her face, but her kind is really troublesome and mischievous. Once I went with a friend to the jungle with the intention of capturing her, but we were spooked and rushed back home in fear. She can sing as well; all those revival songs, but if you listen carefully, you can't understand what language she is singing in but the tune is the same as the songs we sing at revival. One time, it sounded like a huge group of people were laughing and shaking inside the bamboo grove, creating weird sounds but it was actually one of them. It is a female demon because her voice and laughter sounds like a woman's. However, I think that she is the least powerful among demons. She does not have certain powers like other demons. If you see her, you won't have any luck that day in hunting or whatever you do. Aonglemla sightings are common in our village. In fact, there is a particular place in our village called Aonglemlatsü Lushi. We believe that Aonglemla lives there so the villagers have named it after her. Usually, we try to avoid that place and no one has ever claimed that area for farming or cultivation.

Contrary to Bendangyanger's opinion, writer Talitemjen Imchen feels that Aonglemla is actually one of the most powerful demons with a range of supernatural powers that include creating powerful auditory and visual illusions. He says that the most likely places where one can expect to encounter Aonglemla are marshy places and dense bamboo groves. They live as close to water bodies as possible, and these encounters usually occur when humans trespass on their territories either by hunting or constructing houses. Many of his experiences with Aonglemla occurred during the 1980s when he lived in Khensa, his ancestral village before he relocated to Mokokchung and Dimapur:

I have heard stories that Aonglemlatsü's feet look like a dog's paws and that she walks backwards although I have not seen it myself. There are specific routes and paths that she takes in the forest. There are many of them, it's not just one. If we trespass their territory, hunt or build houses on their spot, they will disturb us. They can create different kinds of sounds, like the sound of a hundred daos being scraped, rustling and shaking bamboo groves with vigour, appearing and disappearing right in front of our eyes.

I had one such experience when I lived in Khensa. It was harvest season, so I went to the farm with my friend. It was a rainy day and a heavy downpour continued till night. My friend and I did some clearing in the forest, burned some bee hives and returned to our field at around 12 am. By the time we had finished eating dinner, it was about 2 in the morning. Around that time, we heard chopping sounds in the bamboo grove nearby. My friend was scared; actually both of us were really terrified. We could clearly hear the sound of someone chopping and felling trees and we sensed that it was a spirit or demon. No human in his right mind would chop trees in the dead of the morning. It was an odd hour for anyone logging trees, so it could only be Aonglemlatsü. I exchanged a look with my friend and I knew we had come to the same conclusion. My friend made a snarky comment, 'Oh great, it is such a blessing. It is difficult to cut all the bamboo trees, so you might as well chop all of them.' Suddenly, it felt like all the trees in the forest were being simultaneously chopped off. That night was so scary. Both of us decided to sleep together but we could not sleep for a long time.

So, there are all kinds of encounters with Aonglemlatsü. One of my villagers, Tinumangyang died. I think his fate was connected with Aonglemlatsü. Everywhere he went, he met Aonglemlatsü though he was not scared of her. He died only this year (2018); he was a Pongener. Every time he went to the forest, he encountered her. It was like she was tailing him. It was a sign. We believe that Aonglemlatsü would make her presence known if there was going to be some illness or death. She came and haunted me first before my father died, then my brother and my mother. Right around the time before my father's death, she disturbed me frequently. It got to a point where I became so

scared that I begged her, 'I am really scared, please stop taunting me.' The moment I spoke these words, the taunting stopped. She understands our language perfectly well.

WHEN HUMANS HUNT A SUPERNATURAL ENTITY: DISCURSIVE SHIFTS IN AONGLEMLA'S REPRESENTATION

Around the late 1970s/1980s, Imtikumzuk Amer went hunting with his friends in Merapani in Wokha district and allegedly shot a Aonglemla. Not a jungle fowl or a deer, but the powerful, supernatural entity Aonglemla. A mere bullet was able to bring her down. Now this was a story that was told with relish and circulated with many supplementary details and embellishments. Amer attained some level of notoriety for being the person who was able to vanquish Aonglemla. Legends now surrounded his life and death, and stories are circulated that his material prosperity doubled after he killed Aonglemla. His death was also somehow linked with this particular incident. It was through the grapevine that I came to know of Amer, even though he had already passed away decades ago. His wife had settled down in Lungwiram, a locality in Dimapur which was where she narrated what she remembered of her late husband's encounter:

A group of them went hunting around April. We were in Wokha area at that time. They went hunting to the forest bordering Merapani. It was a stormy day with heavy rain and thunder. The trees were shaking with the force of the rain. While exploring the forest, they saw a human like figure perched on the top of a huge tree. The figure had a tiny face and really long hair and they spoke among themselves that it must be Aonglemla. My husband took aim and shot the figure. It fell from the tree into the water. The rain storm became more severe after he shot the figure. That's what he said happened right after. So, they concluded that they shouldn't have shot an evil spirit, which was probably why

there was such a heavy rain storm. They were really scared at that moment.

When they went down to the water to see what they had shot, the figure had a tiny face, really long hair and her feet were turned backwards. Just as they had heard! They were now sure it was Aonglemla, an entity they had heard stories about but never seen before. All the physical features matched the description. Some of them wanted to carry the body back home but the others disagreed. Finally, they decided to put the dead creature back in the water. I am not sure of the exact date, but we were posted in Wokha from 1977 to 1986 so it happened around that time. The creature's hair had a reddish tinge that girls these days colour their hair with. A bit like maroon, with a tiny face and human-like feet, but they were turned backwards. Even its ears were like human ears. Of course, I was not there so I haven't seen it. But that is what they said happened. Even they were not completely sure, but it resembled what they had heard about Aonglemla. They made jokes that my husband will meet some misfortune now that he had killed her. They got really scared so none of them wanted to bring the body back otherwise I would have seen it too.

Imtikumzuk Amer died in 1993 due to a terminal illness, almost a decade after this incident, and by the time I heard about the encounter in 2018, folk beliefs about encountering Aonglemla had been inserted into this narrative. By then, this was a story that had probably been told and retold numerous times with modifications. Besides the encounter, what was also circulated was his sudden financial windfall and the implications that his death was the consequence of him killing a supernatural entity. It is also worth mentioning that one of Imtikumzuk's friends who was present during this fateful hunting trip remembered the incident quite differently. His account provided a stark contrast to the popular narrative of Imtikumzuk shooting Aonglemla. In this version, it was not Aonglemla that was shot as claimed, but a primate species that closely resembled the Slow Loris. We have to acknowledge that not every personal narrative is based on facts, nor should we reduce every story/encounter to being illusive just

because it lacks empirical evidence. It is, however, in the very nature of oral narratives as they are passed from one person to another, from one generation to another, from one context to another, that these narrative/s undergo some transmutation.

What this particular narrative/s brings to our attention is the discursive shifts occurring in the perceptions and representations of Aonglemla within current contexts. If we examine the timelines of these oral narratives, especially from the last part of the 20th century till current times, there is a massive swing happening in power dynamics. There is a multiplicity of versions and contested ideas about Aonglemla, but in the past she was this powerful entity that evoked fear and reverence in humans because of her supernatural powers: a messenger of death, harbinger of illness and bad luck, kidnapper of human beings and a creator of illusions. The message implicit in all these different narratives and manifestations is that humans should avoid crossing paths with Aonglemla. This is what has altered. She is still a powerful entity, but there is that immense curiosity and desire to conquer her and seize her powers. Current narratives clearly reflect discursive shifts in terms of contexts, beliefs and approaches regarding Aonglemla. What was once unconquerable and intangible, now seems a possibility.

WHO IS THE QUARRY NOW?

Once conceived as frightening and indomitable, emerging narratives now consider Aonglemla as a hunter's mark, a potential quarry and a resource of nature that needs to be subjugated to human jurisdiction. So, there is a plethora of myths about her powers and how possessing them can elevate the owner's life in the material world. One of the beliefs regarding Aonglemla is that capturing her can bring prosperity to the owner. N. Lolen Longchar, one of the resource persons, says

that even the crushed bones of Aonglemla are so precious that they are sold for lakhs of rupees. According to him, there is a belief that she carries her power in a pouch under her right arm and if you can get hold of it, then you can control her and also attain material prosperity. He adds that in his village, there is a giant wild mushroom species called *Aonglemla Konger* (Aonglemla mushroom) so named because Aonglemla supposedly sleeps on it. An inedible mushroom usually found in deep forests, these mushrooms apparently indicate the presence of Aonglemla in the forest.

Many hunters have devised different tactics to capture her without much success. Some have followed her footprints only to realize that since her feet are turned backwards, they are actually following her trail in the opposite direction. Others have placed animal traps around her regular haunts without much success. Some decades ago, when he was an active hunter, Chubatemjen Tzüdir was approached by a man from Kangtsüng village to capture Aonglemla. In exchange for successfully capturing Aonglemla, the man claimed that he would be paid Rs 10 lakhs in cash:

He asked me if I hunted. I have spent my entire life hunting in the forest so I said yes. He asked me if I had heard of Aonglemla and I answered that there was one in my village as well. So, he divulged the technique with which I could capture her. 'To catch Aonglemla, the trap should include a wooden trunk carved in the shape of a spinning top and this must be pinned to the ground in the marshy part of the forest, where she normally dwells. Then you pile bananas and banana leaves on its top. She will try to get the bananas and fall down in the process. When she is on the ground, pin her with large tree trunks and smash her feet with a boulder. Do not cut off her feet with a dao. Her power is in her feet and worth crores of rupees. If you find her, capture her and bring her to me.' This is what he told me when I met him (he chuckled uncontrollably). But where will I find Aonglemla? I did hear that there was one in Arnukong near Patianü (betel leaf forest) but I had never seen that one. I had seen a picture though,

someone who had seen her had drawn it and its true that she has long hair. She has long hair from the top of her head down to her feet like a horse's mane, like in the picture I drew for you.¹³

On July 12, 2012, *Nagaland Post* reported that a strange looking creature had been captured around Jalukie area by hunters. The report suggested that this creature was allegedly the mythical Aonglemla. A very grainy image of the alleged Aonglemla was published although the article has since been removed from the newspaper's website. The figure in the pixelated image had a close resemblance to a member of the primate family. There was no follow-up report so we do not know what happened to the creature that was captured, whether it was actually Aonglemla or an endangered species, or whether any protective/investigative measures were initiated. In contemporary contexts, this seems to be the prevalent narrative where a hunter is able to capture the elusive Aonglemla and claim some kind of ownership over her physical being and her powers. She is the ultimate quarry that hunters go searching for because capturing her symbolizes many things: man's victory over the wild, human versus divine and men versus women.

Why is this the dominant plotline of Aonglemla's narratives in current times? We have to keep in mind that these narratives originate from a social context that is dominantly patriarchal and that those involved in constructing these narratives are all men. Is it the re-assertion of Christian faith over indigenous beliefs? Is it a reminder that women should not rise above their patriarchal station? Folklore is inherently loaded with the ideology of the masses and if we look at Aonglemla's narratives from this lens, it sheds light on the social and cultural context from where it emanates. From this lens, the hunt for Aonglemla ultimately leading to her captivity has less to do with her supposed malevolence, and more to do with the suppression of female power. Of course, calling a powerful woman evil/witch is an age-old tactic employed by patriarchy to prevent women from being empowered; powerful women are the biggest threat to patriarchy.

Within the larger Naga context, the huge brouhaha and vehement protests against the 2017 ULB elections by different groups/sections of society are tangible evidence that Naga society is still not willing to give women the opportunity to take political decisions and call the shots outside the domestic sphere. These burgeoning narratives of Aonglemla being hunted and captured is reflective of Naga society's stance on women who strive for ambition and power; that they will be subdued and punished for transgressing the boundaries created by patriarchy.

A resource person sent me a series of five images via WhatsApp. They were disturbing images of a charred skeleton which he claimed to be of Aonglemla. According to the story, the individual who was responsible for killing Aonglemla met with a fatal accident after the hunt and had passed away. The people now in possession of Aonglemla's dead body were trying to sell it at a very high price. These images had been sent to my resource person and probably other people who could be potential buyers or bring in interested buyers. The skeleton in the series of images had a human like form with elongated legs, with hands and feet curved inwards. The skull was oval shaped and narrow with extremely large sockets and did not resemble a human skull. Whatever it was, the tragic remains of the body did not resemble a human skeleton.



Figures 4–8. A series of images circulated over WhatsApp claiming that these were the remains of Aonglemla¹⁴

SHE WHO WALKS WITH FEET FACING BACKWARDS AND LAUGHS IN THE WILDERNESS



Figure 5.

TALILULA LONGCHAR



Figure 6.

SHE WHO WALKS WITH FEET FACING BACKWARDS AND LAUGHS IN THE WILDERNESS



Figure 7.

TALILULA LONGCHAR



Figure 8.

Curious, I went to the Department of Forests, Ecology and Wildlife in Dimapur to get an expert's perspective on these images. On examining the photographs, Suman Sivachar, the current Wildlife Warden at the Department of Forests, Ecology, Environment and Wildlife in Dimapur found certain similarities between the skeleton in the images and the western Hoolock Gibbon, an endangered primate species found in Eastern Bangladesh, North-eastern India and North-western Myanmar. He said that they shared a similar body structure and stature although the skeleton had much shorter limbs than the Hoolock and the skull was shaped a little differently. However, both of us found the long bunch of hair on the skeleton very perplexing. Obed Swu, ACF (Assistant Conservator of Forests) at the Nagaland Zoological Park in Dimapur claimed that he had also received similar images and offers of buying Aonglemla many years back. His designation as a Conservator has taken him to all the remote parts of Nagaland, and he had vast experience of forest life in the state. However, he maintained that he had never come across any creature or animal that resembled the images of Aonglemla and brushed them off as a silly legend.

Sivachar's theory that Aonglemla could possibly be the Hoolock Gibbon is quite fascinating and worth exploring. There are certain similarities between the Hoolock and Ao folklore's Aonglemla. Both of them are tiny and agile, inhabit deep forests and also share a similar taste in food – worms, insects and leaves. An extremely responsive creature, the Hoolock is known for its emotive calls that echo all across the forest, a trait shared by Aonglemla. Could the supernatural entity of the Ao folklore called Aonglemla actually be a primate? This representation is more in tune with the reasoning of current contexts, but we do have folklore that augments this idea. I have mentioned in my footnotes that within Ao folklore, the tale of Aonglemla's origin in another version is also known as the tale of how man transformed into monkeys. Lotha folklore has the same tale regarding the origin of monkeys. Other Naga tribes also have beliefs about an entity that

shares the same behavioural traits and physical attributes with Ao Naga folklore's Aonglemla. It is possible that in primeval times, the Hoolock Gibbon or another primate species was conceived to be a supernatural entity and was thus christened Aonglemla within the Ao Naga context.

Primate or supernatural entity, myth or fact, malevolent or benevolent, these contesting narratives have only fuelled the belief in Aonglemla. The circulation of these images through WhatsApp validates this belief, providing some kind of tangible evidence in a digital age where pictures are the ultimate proof. Whether these images are authentic or doctored is beside the point. These images represent the new folklore of Aonglemla in a contemporary, digitized context where narratives are circulated through technology and reach a wider network of people. What they also expose is an issue of grave importance universally, which has to do with conservation of nature and maintaining an ecological equilibrium. Whether hunters are stalking what they really believe is Aonglemla or whether this belief is being exploited as a clever marketing strategy, wildlife poaching is an issue that needs to be taken seriously. The Morung Express reported that according to the Forest Survey of India (FSI) (2015), Nagaland has lost 352 sq.km forest cover since 2011, while data compiled by them in 2013 recorded the highest rate of decline in forest cover among Indian states during the time the report was compiled. Within the Naga context, there is an urgent need to educate the people about the importance of conserving nature and wildlife as well as creating policies to ensure their protection. Of course, as a society where hunting is not merely for sustenance but also integrated into religious and cultural practices, these policies have to be created keeping in mind these specific social and cultural contexts.

If we follow the trajectory of the narratives of Aonglemla, it is incredible to see how these narratives have evolved and adapted to the social, cultural and religious context of different historical timelines. Stories, tales, myths, legends and images are loaded with texts and sub-texts. The discursive shifts that the oral narratives of Aonglemla

have undergone are a testimony to folklore's mutative quality, the complex ways in which it operates and its relevance for society. Most importantly, it underscores the transformative power of storytelling in human lives.

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NOTES

1. In Ao language, *pa* denotes he/him and is also the suffix added to names to denote the masculine gender. However, in informal settings, *pa* is often used interchangeably to refer to both masculine or feminine genders.
2. According to Lesemew Yimchunger, one of my resource persons, the Yimchunger Nagas believe in a wood spirit with long hair and backward feet called *Mükiülaberü*, which loosely translates to a spirit of the woods. Yimchunger says that *Mükiülaberü* is not considered malevolent by the community and encounters with her are quite rare. The Mekuri community

also believes in a being with the same physical description which they call *Sangkunialü*.

3. In Sümi Naga folklore, there is a malicious female spirit of the woods called *Müzämüzä*, whose voice echoes in the forest, misleads men in the jungle and causes temporary or permanent insanity (Hutton, 1968, pp. 197-198).
4. Multiple variations of this particular tale are in circulation in the Ao Naga community. The same tale narrated by N. Lolen Longchar ends with the girl transforming into Aonglemla, while in another version, both the boy and the girl run away and transform into Aonglemla. In Temsula Ao's *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (1999), a folktale titled 'How a Boy Turned into a Monkey' tells the same story, albeit in this context, the boy transforms into a monkey in the end. It is also interesting to note that this same tale exists within the folklore of the Lotha Nagas. The legend of 'How Men became Monkeys,' a Lotha Naga folktale translated by Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton (*A Girl Swallowed by a Tree*, 2017), tells the same story.
5. For the purpose of this research, the author translated the origin tale of Aonglemla. References for this translation were taken from the folktale titled *Aonglemlatsü* from Talitemjen Imchen's *Tar Nunger Otsü* (2013), published in Ao language as well as the other variations of this tale narrated by different resource persons.
6. According to Ao folklore, a hornbill's feather impregnated a woman named Longkongla, and she gave birth to a son who became the progenitor of the Ozukum clan. *Ozu* means bird and *kum* means to become, so Ozukum means someone who originated from birds, specifically hornbills.
7. In Ao, *warong* means bamboo grove.
8. *Orok* means wild pheasant or fowl.
9. An *arasesür* is an indigenous healer. They possess healing powers as well as divine abilities. A person who has *ki-nela* (tiger-soul) is also known as an *arasesür/arasesüsür*.
10. In Ao, *süpeti* means the traditional woven wraparound skirt also known as *mekhela*.
11. In Ao language, *sungsa* is the common term for trees that are used for timber like oak and alder.
12. *Dao* is Nagamese Creole for the traditional sword used by Nagas for head hunting as well as agrarian purposes.
13. Chubatemjen Tzüdir drew a rough sketch of Aonglemla in my notepad. In his creative representation of Aonglemla, she looked like a furry animal with

a longer mane in the back that tapered down from the top of the head till the end of the body.

14. The resource person (identity withheld on request) gave his consent to release the images received on WhatsApp.

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